Employee Retention: Perspectives of Foreign Teachers at a Demonstration (Satit) School in Thailand

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Abstract. *The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons of foreign teachers who are working at a demonstration school in terms of retention. A qualitative research approach was applied to answering the research questions proposed for this study, employing a Phenomenological strategy. The setting involved purposive sampling that was used to identify 7 participants who had experienced this phenomenon. Interview data, document reviews were integrated to answer the two research questions. The participants were interviewed by using an in-depth semi-structured interview. All the perceptions were interpreted into nine categories, they were: (1) Reason for teaching career, (2) Life experience, (3) Work environment, (4) Work experience, (5) Reason for retention, (6) Reason for leaving, (7) controversial FTS' position, (8) Problem issues, (9) Future plan. The important findings of this study regarding employee retention are their reasons for retention and leaving. Concerning the retention issue, the reasons mainly conclude enjoying teaching, good vacation, good salary, and pleasant work environment as well as some personal reasons. At the same time, the potential leaving reasons refer to dissatisfaction with management, communication problems in terms of cultural understanding, and personal reasons for going back to their countries.*

Key words: Employee Retention, Foreign Teacher, Demonstration School, Thailand

Introduction

Teacher turnover continually draws the attention of policymakers, researchers, and administrators (Harris & Adams, 2007). For example, in a study of teacher attrition in Texas, it was estimated that the teacher turnover rate was 15% overall and nearly 40% for those in their first three years of teaching. A similar study in North Carolina estimated costs for recruiting, hiring and professional development of newly hired teachers at $ 11,500 per teacher (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004). It is estimated that the total cost for US school districts nationwide to recruit, hire, and retrain replacement teachers to fill the positions is approximately 7.34 billion dollars. This price is not inclusive of the impact on student performance that occurs when qualified teachers leave the classroom (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). This is because usually staff turnover imposes training, interviewing, and productivity costs on an organization. Yet in the educational system, turnover can also compromise student learning. Teachers generally need to acquire 5 years of experience to become fully effective at improving student performance (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Schools with high turnover rates, such as those located in urban areas, fill vacant positions with inexperienced teachers, leading to concentrations of less effective teachers among their staff (Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002). In this context, teacher retention has an important role to play in raising student performance.

The globally competitive situation for skilled and educated workers leads to the urgent need for human resource talent confronted by every organization. There is no doubt that education is a direct way to meet the need. However, the English language education is particularly essential and important. Various countries have come to realize this important trend. Many international conferences are held to discuss this issue and many international schools and programs have emerged to follow this educational trend. This trend is also

happening in Thailand. Many foreign investors come to Thailand to do business, and they usually employ local staff. This promotes the development of English education in Thailand. But a shortage of native speakers is one of the obstacles to providing English language training. Thus, retention of foreign language teachers becomes a big challenge.

The foreign teachers play an important role in the Thai education system. It would also be fair to say that the vast majority of foreign teachers in Thailand are involved in teaching English as a foreign language, whether as a primary or incidental focus. In the International Education Program for Basic Education (IEP), 70% of subjects are taught in English. All of the English language teachers possess at least a Bachelor's degree from a foreign university, have certified ESL/EFL training or a combination of both qualifications.

Purpose

Because foreign teachers are an important human resource for Thai education development, it is vital to understand how these teachers think and how they feel about working at an IEP School. It is important for the IEP School to recognize their foreign teachers. Their ideas can be seen as one issue for Thai educational policy makers to consider when they address or face issues in terms of foreign teacher retention. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the reasons foreign teachers who are working at the IEP School give for staying on the job or leaving.

Research Questions

The two research questions of this study were:

1. What reasons do foreign teachers give for continuing to work at their job at the International Education Program School?

2. What reasons do foreign teachers give for leaving their job at the International Education Program School?

Literature Review

Erling's (1990) Comprehensive Retention and Attrition Model divided teacher retention into four basic types: Absolute Retention, Teaching Field Retention, School Retention, and Profession Retention. Another definition of retention is the

facilitation of continuous employment by ensuring a positive work environment for professional practice (Baer, Fagin & Gordon, 1996, cited in Anne, 2005), while the Harvard Business Essentials (2002, cited in Starosta, 2006) defined retention as the "converse of turnover-turnover being the sum of voluntary and involuntary separations between an employee and his or her company" (p.60). On the other hand, Waldman and Arora (2004) claimed that employee retention is not just the opposite of turnover. It is also utilized to determine what is wanted rather than what is not wanted. Employee retention is primarily concerned with why employees prefer to remain with their current organization. It also tries to prevent a problem from occurring rather than resolving a problem that has occurred.

Billingsley (2003) produced a schematic representation of the range of influences on teachers 'career decisions, including External Factors, Employment Factors, and Personal Factors. External factors (economic, societal, institutional), which are external to the teacher and employing district, have an indirect effect on teachers 'career decisions'. The center of this model focuses on employment factors (professional qualifications, work conditions and rewards, and commitments to school, district, teaching field and teaching profession). Billingsley (1993, p.147) hypothesized that when "professional qualifications and work conditions are not as favorable; teachers are likely to experience fewer rewards and, thus, reduced commitment whether teachers actually leave depends on a host of personal, social, and economic factors". Personal Factors include variables outside of the employment arena that may directly or indirectly influence career decisions, such as life circumstances and priorities.

This literature review found that employee retention is a complex concept which has several dimensions.

Research Design and Strategy

For this thesis, the researcher chose the qualitative research approach. There are Creswell (2003) updated the five main qualitative research strategy: ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology and narrative research strategy. A phenomenological research strategy is chosen for

this study. Indeed, there are two major variants of phenomenology influential in contemporary qualitative methodologies are the hermeneutic and the existential (Schwandt, 2007).

There are two approaches that are highlighted in phenomenology strategy: transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). These two main phenomenological approaches evident in the nursing literature are called descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology respectively (Cohen & Omery, 1994 cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004).

For this study, the researcher used the hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological strategy to describe the experience of the participants and also interpret the meaning of their interview responses to find the essence of this phenomenon for those participants.

Research Methods

The data for this study came from seven participants who teach in the International Education Program (IEP) one of Thailand's demonstration school. Demonstration schools are attached to universities. There are 20 to 25 foreign teachers employed at the school. Seven teachers responded to an invitation to participate as informants in this study. All had at least one year's experience at the school, four were female and three were male, while nationalities represented were USA, British and Philippine.

In order to address this purpose it is necessary to clear up the perceptions of the foreign teachers about retention issue as they experience and perceive.

In a phenomenological study, the participants may be located at a single site, although they need not be. However, most important, they must be individuals who had experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences (Creswell, 1998). As this study focused on the foreign teacher's retention, so the participants that were chosen for this purpose were foreign teachers who had experienced the retention in the school. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who had the experience of retention.

As mentioned by Creswell (2003) qualitative research takes place in the natural setting. The qualitative researcher often goes to the site (home, office) of the participant to conduct the research, so all interviews were conducted according to requirements of participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used interview and document review to collect the data. The interview questions were created according to Patton (2002). The in-depth, semi-structured tape-recorded interviews were conducted following an interview guide.

For data analysis, the phenomenology approach uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an "essence" description (Moustakas, 1994 cited in Creswell, 2003). In phenomenology, there have been specific, structured methods of analysis advanced, especially by Moustakas. Moustakas reviewed several approaches in his book, and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was providing the most practical, useful approach. This study used the specific analysis steps of a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method discussed by Joungtrakul (2007)
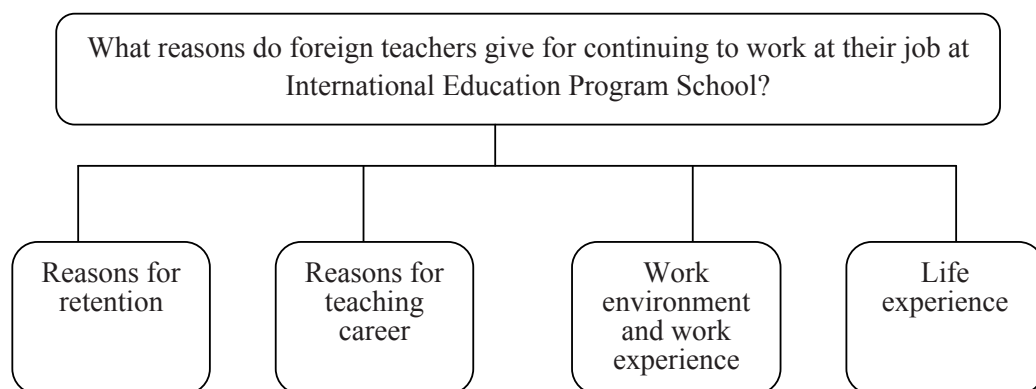
Findings and Discussion

The findings were extracted from collected data. The nine categories of meanings that emerged were as follows: (1) Reasons for teaching career, (2) Life experience, (3) Work environment, (4) Work experience in Thailand, (5) Reasons for retention, (6) Reasons for leaving, (7) Controversial foreign teachers' position, (8) Problem issues, and (9) Future plans.

Response to the Research Questions:

"What reasons do foreign teachers give for continuing to work at their job at International Education Program School?"

Four categories of findings were used for answering this question; they are reason of retention, reason for teaching career, work environment, and life experience as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 The diagram of describing the answers to the research question one

Theme one: Reasons for retention

Billingsley (1993, cited in Billingsley, 2003) schematically represented of the range of influences on teachers' career decisions, including external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. External factors, which are external to the teacher and employing district, have an indirect effect on teachers' career decisions. As for the employment factors, for example, if the professional qualifications and work conditions are not as favorable as elsewhere, teachers seem to experience fewer rewards and then reduced commitment. Personal factors include variables outside of the employment arena that may directly or indirectly influence career decisions, such as life circumstances and priorities.

Guarino , Santibanez and Daley (2006) stated the characteristics of individuals who remain in teaching, namely, the perception that among all available alternative activites, teaching remains the most attractive in terms of compensation, working conditions, and intrinsic rewards. These reasons shared the same motivating principles that led to their entry into teaching.

Theme two: Reasons for teaching career

As have been summarized before, the given reasons by foreign teachers for choosing teaching career are the profit as a teacher, personal reasons, and teaching itself as an enjoyable career and reason of travelling at the same time. Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno (2000, cited in Guarino, Santibanez & Daley, 2006) found that 83% of teachers from 660

public school with 5 or fewer years of experience felt that the job involves work that one loved to do, and 81% responseded that it was essential that any job allows time for family. Another specific exploration by King (1993) was that salary, prestige, and autonomy were cited as more important motivators for men than for women for reasons of entrying teaching profession, whereas vacation time and the ability to couple teaching with child-rearing were cited as more important motivators for women than for men.

Theme three: Work environment and work experience

District, school, and classroom environments define many aspects of a teacher's work life, including the salary and benefits received, nature of the community and student population, physical facilities, role expectations, as well as the professional communities in which teachers live out their everyday work lives. In a national study of teachers, Ingersoll (2001, cited in Billingsley, 2003) states that:

> *"The data show that, in particular, low salaries, inadequate support from the school administration, student discipline problems, and limited faculty input into school decision-making all contribute to higher rates of turnover, after controlling for the characteristics of both teachers and schools." (p. 7)*

The experience of all participants towards the work environment and work experience here can be divided into two opposite opinions, namely, the

positive and the negative one.

The positive one mentioned that the school has good teachers, facilities, and the work is enjoyable. Just as Billingsley (2003) stated that when teachers have overall positive feelings about the climate of their schools, they are more likely to stay in teaching. The feeling towards the school climate can influence the retention of teachers, while the negative one said that work here was frustrating and annoying and also involves problems with students and management.

Previous research suggested that teachers were more likely to leave teaching or indicate their intention to leave without adequate support from administrators and colleagues (Billingsley, 2003). Also, Billingsley and Cross (1992, cited in Billingsley, 2003) claimed that special and general educators who reported higher levels of support from their principals were more likely to be less stressed, more satisfied with their jobs, and more committed to their employing school than those receiving less support. This issue will be presented in detail later.

Theme four: Life experience

For the life experience, the attitude of participants are positive. Most of their expression turn towards the enjoyable.

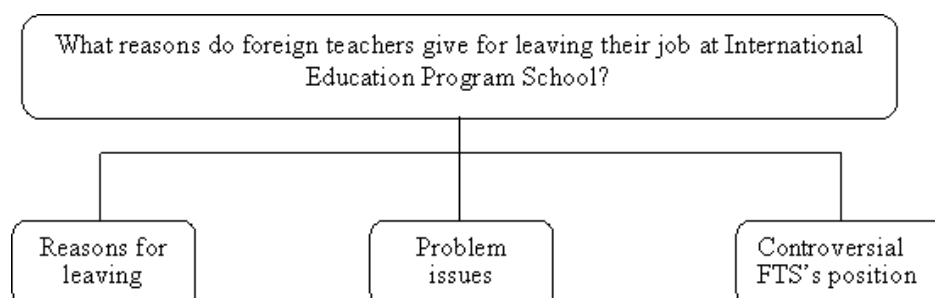According to Jassawalla, Truglia and Garvey (2004), cross-cultural adaptation is the biggest challenge that derails expatriate success. Yavas and Bodur (1999) claimed that one of the pricipal causes seems to be the inability of expatriate managers to deal with cross-cultural adaptation which is a broad term that is related to differences in culture and language, living conditions, uprooting spouses and families, and working harmoniously with co-workers with different cultural backgrounds. Most of the participants expressed the view that they dealt with cultural adaptation well.

In summary, in order to figure out the reasons for foreign teachers' retention, the categories of reasons for retention, reasons for teaching career, work environment and work experience, and life experience were clarified by the researcher. For the reasons for retention, they mainly can be categorized into external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. Participants shared their reasons for choosing a teaching career from their own perspective freely. At the same time, from the researcher's interpretation, the work environment,work experience, and life experience of participants affected their intentions about retention.

"What reasons do foreign teachers give for leaving their job at International Education Program School?"

There are three categories of findings: reason of leaving, problem issues, and controversial FTS's position were used to answer this research question as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The diagram of describing the answers to the research question two

Theme one: Reasons for leaving

When asking about reasons for their possible turnover, three aspects were given by participants: personal reasons, culture shock, and school issues, such as management problems, lack of respect from the school, and not receiving a new contract from school.

Different countries have different cultures. The participants were impacted by different cultures. Thai culture had its special ways that are often different from Western cultures. As we all know, most Thai people have a basic understanding of Buddhism and many Thai people practice Buddhism. Payutto (2005, cited in Sakulkoo, 2009) stated that in the Western context, people would invent and use technology in order to manage or have power over nature or the environment. People boast about their self esteem when they accomplish their success in controlling the environment. When people try to win but they fail to do that, they often feel upset and suppress their desire. Also, when people want to fulfill their desire, others will not view it as unusual matter. It is acceptable. Nevertheless, in Thailand, people have a different viewpoint. According to Buddhist philosophy, each individual will try to live their life without causing any harm to others. Buddhists believe in decreasing greed and causing no harm to others. Buddhism trains people to look at human desire as greed. Buddhism teaches people to live their life sufficiently. If anyone tries hard to fulfill their greed, good Buddhists would view it as unethical. All these situations would cause culture shock for the foreigners.

In terms of school issues, the management is a big problem for their leaving. This showed the same information as we talked about before. That is, support from school is very important element for retention.

As Maslow (1976) stated, all humans have a need to be respected and to have self-esteem and self-repect. People need to engage themselves to gain recognition and have an activity or activities that give the person a sense of contribution, to feel accepted and self-valued, be it in a profession or hobby.

Theme two: Problem issues

During the data interpretation, a lot of problem issues were raised by the teachers. Without a doubt, these issues can indicate direct reasons for their leaving, as well as insight into their possible turnover intention reasons. The researcher summarized the problems from the data as: teaching problems, communication problems, and workplace problems.

For teaching problems, the language barrier and no teaching materials combine to contribute to this issue.

Communication problems can be easily understood. But here have two opposing ideas. One side expressed the view that this issue is ongoing. Another side mentioned that they can conduct communication in the school. For the first group, their problems are mainly caused by the intercultural communication. The participants referred to irresponsible communication and ineffective communication.

Because communication is an element of culture, it has often been said that communication and culture are inseparable. Jandt (2000) claimed that culture cannot be easily understood without a study of communication, and communication can only be understood with an understanding of the culture. Another group admitted that they also have communication difficulties, but the different point is that they can be solved and they are only problems in terms of language instead of a culture-caused problem.

Theme three: Controversial FTS's position

Professional development may be thought of as one reason for leaving. Brownell et al. (1994-1995, cited in Billingsley, 2003) claimed from their study that stayers prefer more opportunities for their own professional development. Nevertheless, this condition is denied according to the participants.

Besides negative opinion of absence of career development in terms of controversial FTS's position, there was still positive opinion about this issue.

To sum up, the reasons for leaving showed directly in their explanations for leaving. Besides their straightforward statements, the problem issues can demonstrate their possible reasons for leaving, and controversial FTS's position also reveals their intention for staying or leaving.

Implications

One of the important findings of this study was the inefficient cross-cultural management from the participants' perspective. At the demonstration school, the workforce was from a diverse background which is quite different from other Thai schools. The school needs to confront this special phenomenon carefully, especially the school management. However, many problems occur from the perceptions of participants. For example, the foreign teachers reported communication problems, unrecognized problems, and management problems. More important, according to most participants, the school has not perceived the need to pay attention to the management of its diverse workforce. Although most of the time cultural differences cause conflict for organizational operations, other voices argue that judicious handling of cultural differences can led to competitive advantages and also they believe the task of cross-cultural management is not to neutralize cultural differences, but to build on them. In view of the existing situation, it was implied that it was necessary for the school to enhance the abilities of its diverse workforce in the future.

Another important finding is related to the for-eign teachers. It was found that most participants did not adapt themselves to the understanding of Thai culture. Nevertheless, they are teaching in Thailand now, culture understanding is important and awareness of difference between cultures is crucial for effective intercultural communication, a happy work environment and life. There are benefits for both teachers and the school if foreign teachers can develop their knowledge of the local culture and adopt it.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for future research are proposed.

First, this research was conducted by collecting data from foreign teachers at one demonstration school in Thailand. Other studies conduct with other learning institutions may achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Second, this study investigated this phenomenon from the foreign teachers' perspectives. Further studies from the school perspective about their reasons for retention of foreign teachers are suggested.

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